



The Pyrenees

Includes »

Pau	660
Lourdes	665
Parc National des Pyrénées	669
Vallée d'Aspe	670
Vallée d'Ossau	672
Cauterets	674
Vallée des Gaves & Around	676
Upper Garonne Valley	677
Vallée de l'Ariège ...	678

Best Places to Eat

- » Le Viscos (p669)
- » Au Fin Gourmet (p662)
- » Château de Beauregard
(boxed text, p679)
- » Le Sacca (p676)
- » Hôtel les Remparts (p679)

Best Places to Stay

- » Le Viscos (p669)
- » Auberge les Myrtilles
(boxed text, p680)
- » Maison des Consuls
(p680)
- » Château de Beauregard
(p679)
- » Hôtel du Lion d'Or (p675)

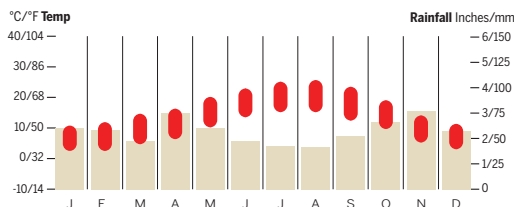
Why Go?

They might not be on quite the same lofty scale as the Alps, but the Pyrenees still pack a mighty impressive mountain punch. Crested by snow for much of the year, these high, wild peaks form a natural frontier between southwest France and northern Spain. End to end, they cover a total distance of around 430km, including the 100km strip of protected land known as the Parc National des Pyrénées, created in 1967 and now an important haven for rare wildlife such as eagles, griffon vultures, izards (a type of goat) and some of the last remaining wild brown bears left in France.

Needless to say, if you're a hiker, biker or skier, or if you're simply a sucker for grandstand views, you'll be in seventh heaven in the Pyrenees. From historic ski stations to isolated valleys, from subterranean caves to snow-dusted peaks, there are enough sights to fill a lifetime of visits. Breathe deep: the wilds are calling.

When to Go

Pau



February Come for Pau's annual carnival. Visit during Easter for the Festival International de Musique Sacrée.

July Shepherds move their flocks in the Transhumance, and the Tour de France races through.

November to March Peak skiing season – book hotels well ahead.

Getting There & Away

The two main towns, Pau and Lourdes, are well served by rail. Both also have airports. Pau is served by Ryanair flights to and from the UK and Belgium, while Air France handles domestic services, and several other budget carriers fly to European cities. Lourdes' airport has scheduled services to Paris.

Outside of the towns there are limited bus services, but to really explore you'll need your own wheels. Drivers needn't worry – the roads are well maintained and nowhere near as hair-raising as other precipitous regions such as the Alps.

Pau

POP 80,600

Palm trees might seem out of place in this mountainous region, but its chief city, Pau (rhymes with 'so'), has long been famed for its mild climate. In the 19th century it was a favourite wintering spot for wealthy Brits and Americans, who left behind grand villas, English-style flower-filled public parks, and promenades with dizzying vistas of the snow-dusted peaks. These days Pau is still an elegant city, and makes an ideal base for exploring the northern reaches of the Pyrenees.

Sights

The town centre sits on a small hill with the Gave de Pau (River Pau) at its base. Along its crest stretches the **bd des Pyrénées**, a wide promenade offering panoramic views of the mountains. A creaky old free **funicular railway** dating from 1908 clanks down from the **bd des Pyrénées** to **av Napoléon Bonaparte**, allowing you to avoid the uphill slog from the train station.

Pau's tiny old centre extends for around 500m around the château, but despite its minuscule dimensions, it's worth a stroll for its much-restored medieval and Renaissance buildings.

Château

CASTLE

(www.musee-chateau-pau.fr, in French; adult/18-25yr €5/3.50; ☉9.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-6.45pm) Originally the residence of the monarchs of Navarre, Pau's castle was transformed into a Renaissance château amid lavish gardens by Marguerite d'Angoulême in the 16th century. Marguerite's grandson, Henri de Navarre (the future Henri IV), was born here – cradled, so the story goes, in an upturned tortoise shell (still on display in one of the museum's rooms).

Much restored, the château is now mainly worth visiting for its collections of Gobelin tapestries and Sevres porcelain, as well as its fine Renaissance architecture.

Within the brick-and-stone **Tour de la Monnaie** below the main château, a modern lift (free) hauls you from place de la Monnaie up to the ramparts.

Admission includes an obligatory one-hour guided tour in rapid-fire French (departing every 15 minutes), but you can pick up an English-language guide sheet at the reception desk.

Musée Bernadotte

MUSEUM

(8 rue Tran; adult/student €3/1.50; ☉10am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Sun) The Musée Bernadotte has exhibits illustrating the improbable yet true story of how a French general, Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte (nicknamed 'Sergent belle-jambe', apparently on account of his elegant legs), born in this very building, became king of Sweden and Norway in 1810, when the Swedish Riksdag (parliament) reckoned that the only way out of the country's dynastic and political crisis was to stick a foreigner on the throne. The present king of Sweden, Carl Gustaf, is the seventh ruler in the Bernadotte dynasty. You'll spot the museum by the blue-and-yellow Swedish flag fluttering outside.

Musée des Beaux-Arts

ART MUSEUM

(rue Mathieu Lalanne; adult/student €3/1.50; ☉10am-noon & 2-6pm Wed-Mon) Works by Rubens and El Greco both figure at Pau's fine arts museum, but the museum's prize piece is a famous Degas canvas, *A New Orleans Cotton Office*, painted in 1873.

Festivals & Events

Carnival Week The prelude to Lent brings street parades and a carnival atmosphere to Pau around late February.

Grand Prix Historique (www.grandprixdepauhistorique.com) Vintage-car rally on the streets of Pau, currently held every other year.

L'Été à Pau Lively summer music festival, spanning late July and early August.

Sleeping

Pau is a popular venue for congresses so it's a good idea to book ahead at any time of year. Rates can spike during festivals and special events.

Hôtel Bristol

HOTEL €€

(02 05 59 27 72 98; www.hotelbristol-pau.com; 3 rue Gambetta; s €70-88, d €80-99, f €105-110; 🍷) Pau's nicest midrange option, in a heritage building with surprisingly modern rooms, decked out in crisp whites, slates and crimson, with cool monochrome bathrooms and the odd bit of bespoke art or funky furniture. The upper rooms are the best: ask for one with a balcony overlooking the mountains.

Hôtel Montpensier

HOTEL €€

(02 05 59 27 42 72; www.hotel-montpensier-pau.com; 36 rue Montpensier; s €75-95, d €85-95; 🍷🍷) A pastel-pink, shutter-covered facade conceals smart rooms, all with coir carpets, silk cushions and flat-screen TVs. Some of the bathrooms are starting to show their age, but the free parking's a bonus.

Hôtel Central

HOTEL €€

(02 05 59 27 72 75; www.hotelcentralpau.com, in French; 15 rue Léon Daran; s €59-67, d €56-79; 🍷) The rambling corridors of this old hotel lead to a selection of higgledy-piggledy rooms, variously decorated in bright stripes and citrus shades, most with tall French windows looking over the street. It's worth asking for one of the larger doubles, as the singles are tiny. Parking's only available on the street outside.

Hôtel Bosquet

HOTEL €€

[02 05 59 11 50 11; www.brithotel.fr; 11 rue Valéry Meunier; s €65-75, d €70-80; 🍷] Don't be too downhearted by the unprepossessing exterior – inside, this boxy modern hotel has spacious, well-equipped rooms, with little extras such as mineral water, kettle and tea and coffee (*quel luxe!*) It's a bit charmless, but the street's quiet and pedestrianised, and the breakfast spread is great. No parking's a pain.

**Eating****Au Fin Gourmet**

GASTRONOMIC €€€

(02 05 59 27 47 71; 24 av Gaston Lacoste; menus €28-62; 🍷lunch Tue-Sun, dinner Tue-Sat) Run by the much-lauded Ithurriague brothers, Patrick and Laurent, this *restaurant gastronomique* is a real spoil. In a lovely spot near the base of the funicular, with a delightful patio overlooking shrub-filled gardens, it's quite simply the best place to eat in Pau. The food is quintessential gourmet French, where precision of presentation gets just as much attention as the rich flavours on the plate.

Le Majestic

TRADITIONAL FRENCH €€€

(02 08 92 68 06 89; 9 place Royale; lunch menu 2/3 courses €15/18, dinner menu €28/38; 🍷Mon-Sat) It's fairly new on the scene, but this restaurant has made a name for itself as one of the town's top tables. The setting is fairly starchy – ice-white tablecloths, razor-sharp napkins, besuited waiters – but the menu's full of sophisticated French cuisine: pigeon, turbot, cod steak, local lamb. It's on the leafy square of place Royale, but sadly there's no terrace.

Le Berry

BRASSERIE €€

(02 05 59 27 42 95; 4 rue Gachet; mains €13-18) At the opposite end of the snooty scale, this rough-and-ready locals' diner turns out classic brasserie fare: big hunks of steak, pork cutlets and scrumptious homemade desserts, served with simplicity and efficiency. The lunchtime *plat du jour* is brilliant value at €8 (or €9.30 including a glass of wine and a coffee). Just don't expect any smiles from your waiter.

La Michodière

TRADITIONAL FRENCH €€

(02 05 59 27 53 85; 34 rue Pasteur; menus €15-27; 🍷Tue-Sun) Tucked away on a backstreet near the cinema, in a quaint building dating back to 1609, this cosy little French restaurant is a good place for rich, rustic flavours. It's particularly worth a visit for its *poissons sauvages* (wild fish), most of which are caught in local rivers – look out for trout and bream in season.

L'Entracte

BISTRO €

(02 05 59 27 68 31; 2bis rue St-Louis; lunch mains €7-12, menus €19-23; 🍷lunch Mon-Sat, dinner Thu-Sat) For laid-back eating, this zesty little diner is a good bet, especially at lunch when it serves up crunchy *croques monsieur* and the house special 'croustons' (toasted cheese in various concoctions). Things get a bit more adventurous after dark. It's right opposite the theatre, hence the name ('the interval').

Royal St-André

CAFÉ €

(26 bd des Pyrénées; 🍷10am-2am May-Oct, 2-7pm Nov-Apr) This streetside café-glacier sits in a superb spot on the blvd des Pyrénées, with tables and chairs scattered under shady trees and postcard views of the mountains. It's a favourite with locals for its delicious ice-cream sundaes, sorbets and milkshakes.

Le Champagne

BRASSERIE €

(02 05 59 27 72 12; 5 place Royale; mains €10-15; 🍷Mon-Sat) One of a couple of bustling



Pau

Top Sights

Château A3

Sights

- 1 Musée Bernadotte B3
- 2 Musée des Beaux-Arts D2
- 3 Tour de la Monnaie A3

Sleeping

- 4 Hôtel Bosquet C3
- 5 Hôtel Bristol C3
- 6 Hôtel Central C3
- 7 Hôtel Montpensier B1

Eating

- 8 Au Fin Gourmet C4
- 9 Covered Market C2
- 10 La Michodière B1
- 11 Le Berry C3
- 12 Le Champagne B4
- 13 Le Majestic B4

- 14 L'Entracte B3
- 15 Marché Bio B1
- 16 Royal St-André B4

Drinking

- 17 Au Grain de Raisin A3
- 18 Australia B4
- 19 Galway B4
- 20 Le Bouchon B3
- 21 Le Garage D2
- 22 Péna Muxu D2

Entertainment

- 23 Cinéma Le Méliès B1

Shopping

- 24 Au Parapluie des Pyrénées B2
- 25 Francis Miot A3
- 26 Josuat B2
- 27 La Couronne C3

brasseries on place Royale, ideal for an early-evening beer or a plate of simple *steak-frites*.

Self-Catering

Stock up on picnic goodies at the big **covered market** (place de la République). The smaller **Marché Bio** sells exclusively organic food on place du Foirail every Wednesday and Saturday morning.



Drinking

Pau has several distinct drinking zones; bars generally open from 10am to 2am.

'Le Triangle', bounded by rue Henri Faisans, rue Émile Garey and rue Castetnau, is the centre of student nightlife. Good bets are **Le Garage** (49 rue Émile Garey) – look for the giant stucco mechanic sitting on the roof – and **Péna Muxu** (35 rue Émile Garey), which sometimes has live music.

A short string of grungy bars (**Galway** and **Australia** among them) extends along bd des Pyrénées.

Congenial wine bars near the château include **Au Grain de Raisin** (11 rue Sully), which also has a good range of draft beers, and **Le Bouchon** (46 rue Maréchal Joffre). Look out for the local Jurançon wines (www.cavede jurancon.com), whose vineyards ribbon the surrounding countryside.



Entertainment

For theatre, music, dance and upcoming exhibitions, get hold of *La Culture à Pau*, published every three months and available free from the tourist office.

Exclusively nondubbed films screen at **Cinéma Le Méliès** (☎05 59 27 60 52; 6 rue Bargoïn), Pau's only cinema.

Rugby fans might want to take in a home game of **Section Paloise** (www.section-paloise.com/accueil.php, in French), one of France's leading club sides, at **Stade du Hameau** (☎05 59 02 50 91; bd de l'Aviation).



Shopping

Pau's renowned chocolatiers include **La Couronne** (place Clemenceau) and **Josuat** (23 rue Serviez). Champion jam-maker **Francis Miot** (48 rue Maréchal Joffre) also makes wonderfully quirky sweets and handmade chocolates.

If you've ever despaired of finding a windproof, soak-proof umbrella, stop by **Au Parapluie des Pyrénées** (12 rue Montpensier); its traditional beech-handled, rattan-ribbed umbrellas are used by Pyrenean shepherds.



Information

C Cyber Café (20 rue Lamothe; per hr €4.50; ☎10am-2am Mon-Fri, 2pm-2am Sat & Sun) One of over a dozen internet cafés around town.

Main post office (21 cours Bosquet)

Tourist office (☎05 59 27 27 08; www.pau-pyrenees.com; place Royale; ☎9am-6pm) Closes early Sunday.



Getting There & Away

AIR The **Aéroport Pau-Pyrénées** (☎05 59 33 33 00; www.pau.aeroport.fr) is about 10km northwest of town. Current destinations include London Stansted, Brussels and Paris Beauvais (with Ryanair), plus Paris Orly, Paris Roissy and Lyon with Air France.

BUS Bus services are limited; most regional lines are run by **Citram Pyrénées** (☎05 59 27 22 22; <http://citrampyrenees.fr>). There are four daily buses to Laruns (one hour), plus one daily bus to Agen (3½ hours).

TRAIN As always, trains are the best way of getting around, and there are at least two or three direct TGVs to Paris every day. From Oloron-Ste-Marie, SNCF buses trundle along the Vallée d'Aspe, but the timetables vary greatly depending on the season – ask at the tourist office for details.

Destinations served:

Bayonne €15.50, 1¼ hours

Oloron-Ste-Marie €6.70, 30 minutes

Toulouse €29, 3¼ hours

Paris Montparnasse €84.10, 7½ hours



Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT There are three daily **navettes** (shuttle buses; ☎05 59 26 25 87; www.aeroportexpress.com) between Pau and Biarritz airports (to allow people to fly direct from Pau to Orly and Roissy airports in Paris). To get into the city, your only option's a taxi, which costs from €25 to €30 depending on the traffic and time of day. It's a good idea to book on weekends – call ☎05 59 02 22 22 or reserve online at <http://pau-taxi.com> (in French).

BICYCLE Vélo Station (☎05 59 02 27 54; 9 bd Alsace Lorraine) rents out all manner of bikes.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE There's extensive free parking on place de Verdun. All the major rental-car companies have branches at both the airport and the train station.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT The local bus company, **STAP** (☎05 59 14 15 16; www.bus-stap.com, in French), has a sales and information office on rue Jean Monnet. Single tickets/daily passes/eight-ride *carnets* (books of tickets) cost €1.10/2.50/5.60.

Lourdes

POP 15,700 / ELEVATION 400M

If you've ever wondered what a religious theme park would look like, chances are it'd turn out pretty close to Lourdes. This provincial town, 43km southeast of Pau, has been one of the world's most important pilgrimage sites since 1858, when 14-year-old Bernadette Soubirous (1844–79) saw the Virgin Mary in a series of 18 beatific visions, which came to her in a rocky grotto just outside town. The Vatican confirmed them as bona-fide apparitions, and Bernadette was beatified in 1933; the grotto where she experienced the visions now forms the **Sanctuaires Notre Dame de Lourdes**, considered to be one of the holiest sites in Christendom.

Despite its spiritual importance, genuine holiness is a little hard to come by in Lourdes these days. Catering to some six million pilgrims every year, the town is awash with neon-signed hotels and countless souvenir shops selling all manner of Christian-themed ephemera, from plastic crucifixes and cut-price rosaries to a huge swathe of Madonna-shaped mementoes (Virgin Mary-shaped plastic bottles are particularly popular – just add holy water at the shrine).

But beyond all the tourist tat, there are constant reminders that many people spend their life savings to come here. Each year, around 70,000 invalids make the spiritual pilgrimage to Lourdes in the hope of finding a cure for all manner of afflictions and ailments, and while the town itself can be a pretty disheartening experience, the sanctuaries themselves are refreshingly free of commercial clutter.

Sights

Sanctuaires Notre Dame de Lourdes

SACRED CAVES

The development of the Sanctuaries of Our Lady of Lourdes began within a decade of Ste Bernadette's apparitions in 1858. The main site is approached via one of two gateways; the **Porte St-Michel** and **Porte St-Joseph** (both ☉5am-midnight) or the **Entrée des Lacets** (rue Monseigneur Theas; ☉24hr).

The most dramatic approach is via the Port St-Joseph, from where a broad boulevard sweeps west towards the Byzantine **Basilique du Rosaire** (Basilica of the Rosary), and the **Basilique Supérieure** (Upper

Basilica), topped by lavishly gilded turrets and tiled frescos depicting Bernadette's visions. Beneath the basilica is Lourdes' most revered site, the **Grotte de Massabielle** (sometimes known as the Grotte Miraculeuse or the Grotte des Apparitions), where Bernadette allegedly experienced her famous visions.

The Esplanade des Processions, lined with enormous flickering candles left by previous pilgrims, leads along the river to the grotto's entrance, where people line up patiently for the chance to enter the cave itself, or take a chilly dip in one of the sacred **baths** (☉9-11am & 2.30-4pm Mon-Sat, 2-4pm Sun & holy days). The baths are open to people of all religious persuasions, but they're definitely not for wallflowers: once behind the curtain, you'll be expected to strip off before being swaddled in a sheet and plunged backwards into the icy water.

From Palm Sunday to mid-October, nightly **torchlight processions** start from the Massabielle Grotto at 9pm, while at 5pm there's the **Procession Eucharistique** (Blessed Sacrament Procession) along the Esplanade des Processions.

Château Fort

CASTLE, MUSEUM

(Fortified Castle; adult/child €5/2.30; ☉9am-noon & 1.30-6.30pm) On a rocky pinnacle above town squats this imposing castle. There's been some kind of stronghold on this site since Roman times, but the present building is largely medieval, including the stout walls and the central keep. The castle was fortified again in the 17th and 18th centuries, and served as a state prison following the Revolution.

Since the 1920s, the castle has housed the **Musée Pyrénéen**, which owns one of the region's largest collections of folk art, rural artefacts, tools and other exhibits.

Take the free lift (elevator) from rue Baron Duprat or walk up the ramp at the northern end of rue du Bourg.

Pic du Jer

MOUNTAIN VIEWPOINT

(bd d'Espagne) When the crowds of pilgrims get too much, you can take refuge on the rocky 94m-high pinnacle of the Pic du Jer, which offers panoramic views of Lourdes and the central chain of the Pyrenees.

There are two routes to the top: a punishing three-hour slog along a signed trail, or a speedy six-minute ride on the century-old **funicular** (bd d'Espagne; adult/child return €9/6; ☉10am-6pm Mar-Nov & winter holidays,



9am-8pm mid-Jul-Aug). We'll leave it up to you to decide which is the more rewarding.

Either way, the summit makes a superb spot for a picnic. There's a choice of routes back down: a black-run mountain-bike trail, or a more family-friendly option along the **Voie Verte des Gaves**, a decommissioned railway that finishes up at the lower funicular station.

Take bus 2 from place Monseigneur Laurence.

Chemin de Croix

WALKING TRAIL

The Chemin de Croix (Way of the Cross, sometimes known as the Chemin du Calvaire) leads for 1.5km up the forested hillside from the Basilique Supérieure past 14 Stations of the Cross. Especially devout pilgrims mount to the first station on their knees.

Other Bernadette Sites

On rue Bernadette Soubirous are the **Moulin de Boly** (Boly Mill; No 12), Bernadette's birthplace; and the **Maison Paternelle de**

Ste-Bernadette (No 2; admission €1), the house that the town of Lourdes bought for the Soubirous family after Bernadette saw the apparitions. **Le Cachot** (15 rue des Petits Fossés), a former prison, is where Bernadette lived during the period when she saw the apparitions.

Musée de Lourdes (adult/child €5.50/2.70; ☎9am-noon & 1.30-6.30pm Apr-Oct) explores the town's history and the life of Ste Bernadette, while the **Cinéma Bernadette** (6 av Monseigneur Schoepfer; adult/child €6.50/4.50) shows the two-hour feature film *Bernadette*.



Festivals & Events

Lourdes' renowned week of sacred music, **Festival International de Musique Sacrée**, is held around Easter.



Sleeping

Unsurprisingly considering the hordes of pilgrims who descend on the town every year, Lourdes is awash with hotels (it actually has more accommodation than anywhere in France outside Paris). Only a handful in town are worth a second glance, though – book well ahead, especially around religious holidays and from August to October, or better still, base yourself at one of several lovely *chambres d'hôte* instead.

Eth Bérèye Petit

B&B €€

(☎05 62 97 90 02; www.berypetit.com; 15 rte de Vielle, Beaucens; r €58-64) Mountain views unfurl from every window at this idyllic B&B, lodged inside a 17th-century farmhouse. A huge fireplace takes up most of the cosy lounge, while a glorious oak staircase leads up to three country-cosy rooms upstairs. Top of the heap is the Era Galeria room, with its period 19th-century furniture and French windows leading to a private balcony. It's 12km south of Lourdes off the N21 near Beaucens.

Relais de Saux

B&B €€

(☎05 62 94 29 61; www.lourdes-relais.com; Saux; d €90) More period plushness, this time just north of town in a grand ivy-covered mansion. Swags, ruches and half-testers in the olde-worlde rooms, but it's the wonderful surrounds that sell this place: grassy lawns and tree-filled gardens set out against snowy Pyrenean peaks.

Citea St Jean

HOTEL €€

(☎05 62 46 30 07; lourdes@citea.com; 1 av du Paradis; s €48-60, d €68-90; ☎) If you're determined to stay in Lourdes, this town hotel is

Lourdes

📍 Top Signs

Grotte de Massabielle.....	A2
Sanctuaires Notre Dame de Lourdes.....	C2

📍 Signs

1 Basilique du Rosaire.....	B2
2 Baths.....	B2
3 Château Fort.....	E3
4 Château Fort Entrance.....	E2
5 Château Fort Lift.....	E3
6 Cinéma Bernadette.....	B3
7 Crypt.....	B2
8 Entrée des Lacets.....	A3
9 Le Cachot.....	E3
10 Maison Paternelle de Ste-Bernadette.....	E2
11 Moulin de Boly.....	E2
12 Musée de Lourdes.....	D4
Musée Pyrénéen.....	(see 3)
13 Porte St-Joseph.....	C3
14 Porte St-Michel.....	D2
15 Stations of the Cross.....	B3

🛏 Sleeping

16 Bestwestern Beauséjour.....	G1
17 Hôtel Gallia et Londres.....	C3

🍴 Eating

18 Covered Market.....	E4
19 Monoprix Supermarket.....	F4
20 Restaurant Le Magret.....	E3

just about the best bet, offering plain, modern rooms with nary a Madonna or crucifix in sight. It's part of the Citea chain, so it's businesslike, but even in summer the rates stay reasonable.

Bestwestern Beauséjour

HOTEL €€

(05 62 94 38 18; 16 av de la Gare; d €78-105; ☎) The attractive heritage facade and glossy lobby promises big things at this Best Western – sadly the rooms are as bland and generic as ever. Still it's businesslike and efficient, handy for the station and it's a lot tidier than many places round town. There's a half-decent bar-brasserie attached to the lobby.

Hôtel Gallia et Londres

HOTEL €€€

(05 62 94 35 44; www.hotelgallialondres.com; 26 av Bernadette Soubirous; d €120-240; ☎ Apr-Oct; ☎) A fancier option, worth a mention for its lavish chandelier-clad restaurant and wood-panelled lobby, and a lovely garden far removed from the town fizz. The '70s-meets-1700s rooms are considerably less spangly.

Maison de l'Evêque

B&B €

(05 62 42 02 04; www.maisondeleveque.com; Juncalas; d €50-57) If you've got an aversion to frips and frills, you might want to steer clear of this Juncalas B&B. All four rooms are drowning in flouncy bedspreads, lacy bed canopies and pastel colours, but the whitewashed house has an intriguing history – it was owned by the abbot who confirmed the veracity of Bernadette's early visions. It's in the village of Juncalas, about 8km south of town.

Hôtel des Rochers

HOTEL €€

(05 62 97 09 52; www.lesrochershotel.com; 1 place du Castillou, St-Savin; d/tr €54/74; ☎) When Lourdes' commercialised clutter gets a bit too much, beat a retreat for this cosy village hideaway in the tiny hamlet of St-Savin, about 16km south of Lourdes (in the same village as Le Viscos). Run by an expat English couple, John and Jane, it's a peaceful place to breathe in the mountain air, offering plain rooms, friendly owners and a decent home-cooking restaurant with outstanding valley views.



Eating

Let's face it – Lourdes' eating options are hardly inspirational. There are plenty of restaurants dotted around the main street, but most are decidedly substandard, so pick very carefully.

Restaurant le Magret

TRADITIONAL FRENCH €€

(05 62 94 20 55; 10 rue des Quatre Frères Soulas; lunch menu €11.50-14, dinner menu €28; ☎ Tue-Sun Feb-Dec) The only place in town worthy of recommendation, a rustic restaurant dotted with sepia-tinted photos of Lourdes. It's strong on regional cuisine – particularly pork, trout, duck and cheese from the Vallée d'Ossau – but the ambience might be a little dingy for some.

Self-Catering

Lourdes' **covered market** (place du Champ Commun) occupies most of the square. Opposite you'll find a **Monoprix supermarket** (9 place Champs Commun).

i Information

Forum information office (05 62 42 78

78; www.lourdes-france.com; Esplanade des Processions; ☎ 8.30am-6.30pm) For information on the Sanctuaires.

Tourist office (05 62 42 77 40; www.lourdes-infotourisme.com; place Peyramale; ☎ 9am-6.30pm)

i Getting There & Away

AIR Tarbes-Lourdes-Pyrénées airport (www.tlp.aeroport.fr) is 10km north of Lourdes on the N21. There are three daily flights to Paris (Air France), plus a few flights a week to Brussels (JetAir), and London and Manchester (Ryanair). There's no public transport to the airport.

BUS The small **bus station** (place Cauterets) has services northwards to Pau (though trains are much faster) and is a stop for buses running between Tarbes and Argelès-Gazost (at least eight daily), the gateway to the Pyrenean communities of Cauterets, Luz-St-Sauveur and Gavarnie. SNCF buses to Cauterets (€7, one hour, at least five daily) leave from the train station.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE Lourdes' one-way system changes direction every couple of weeks to keep the souvenir traders happy. Factor in hordes of tourists and you'll be wise to leave your car on the outskirts; there's free parking near the train and bus stations.

TRAIN Lourdes has regular train connections, including TGVs to Pau and Paris Montparnasse. Trains to Toulouse tend to connect through Tarbes.

Destinations served:

Bayonne €21, 1¼ hours

Paris Montparnasse €89.30, 6½ hours

Pau €7.10, 30 minutes

Toulouse €25.10, two hours

Around Lourdes

Grottes de Bétharram

CAVES

(www.betharram.com; adult/child €12.50/7; ☀9am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm mid-Mar-Oct) Along the D937, 14km west of Lourdes, is a series of subterranean caverns carved deep into the limestone rock, and covered with impressive stalactites and stalagmites. Guided visits, by minitrain and barge, last 1½ hours, but be warned: the site gets crushingly busy in high summer.



Parc Animalier des Pyrénées

WILDLIFE PARK

(www.parc-animalier-pyrenees.com; adult/child €12/8; ☀9.30am-6pm Apr-Oct) This excellent animal park is home to a menagerie of animals which were once common sights across the Pyrenees, many of which have either been effectively wiped out (such as the wolf) or are teetering on the brink of extinction. Among the residents are marmots, lynxes, giant ravens, squirrels, otters and a few brown bears. It's near the village of Argelès-Gazost.

Parc National des Pyrénées

Sprawling for 100km across the Franco-Spanish border, the Parc National des Pyrénées conceals some of the last pockets of true wilderness left in France. In partner-

ship with the 156-sq-km Parque Nacional de Ordesa y Monte Perdido to the south, this wild mountain landscape is a haven for all kinds of rare flora and fauna, including some of the country's last remaining golden eagles, brown bears and izaras (a close relation of the chamois). It's also fiercely proud of its culture and heritage: traditional hill-farming and shepherding are still practised here in much the same way as they were a century ago, although on a much smaller scale.

Within the park's boundaries are shimmering lakes, mountain meadows and the highest peaks in southwest France, including Vignemale (3298m), the Pyrenees' loftiest summit. Unsurprisingly, the park is a popular spot with backcountry hikers and winter skiers, but even in the high summer you'll still be able to find plenty of quiet trails and pockets of mountain solitude.

The park's boundaries actually cover a tightly defined area that begins at the southern end of the main western valleys of the French Pyrenees and crosses over the border with Spain.



Activities

Walking

Some 350km of waymarked trails (including the Mediterranean-to-Atlantic GR10)

LE VISCOS

Just 4km south of Argelès-Gazost (16km south of Lourdes) is one of the Pyrenees' jewels, St-Savin. Not only is it officially 'one of France's prettiest villages', but it's home to the wonderful hotel-restaurant **Le Viscos** (☎05 62 97 02 28; www.hotel-leviscos.com; 1 rue Lamarque; d €76-111; ☀closed 2 weeks Jan; ♿).

Run by the seventh generation of the St-Martin family, this country retreat is one of the best gastronomic getaways in the Pyrenees, with cosy rooms stocked with hand-sewn bedspreads and antique furniture, and shuttered windows peeping out onto sublime mountain views.

But it's the **restaurant** (menus €27-89) that keeps people coming from miles around. Run by owner-proprietor and ex-TV chef Jean-Pierre St-Martin, it's one of the most respected tables in southwest France, mixing Basque, Breton and Pyrenean flavours spiced up by the odd flash of fusion inspiration. The house speciality is foie gras served in a variety of creative incarnations, such as a chilled mousse, or on a toasted tartine topped with black truffle. The wine list is full of local cachet, too: Jurançon and Madiran wines both feature heavily. For a real taste adventure, plump for the €89 *menu gastronomique*, which features a belt-busting tour through Jean-Pierre's trademark cuisine, with each dish introduced personally by the chef himself. Be prepared for a long haul and an extra notch on the belt.

Inside the lobby, keep your eyes peeled for some snaps of previous guests (including Paulo Coelho, Michael and Kirk Douglas and the proportionally challenged president himself, Nicolas Sarkozy).

criss-cross the park; some link up with trails in Spain.

Within the park are about 20 *refuges* (mountain huts), primarily run by the Club Alpin Français (CAF). Most are staffed only from July to September but maintain a small winter year-round.

Each of the six park valleys (Vallée d'Aure, Vallée de Luz, Vallée de Cauterets, Val d'Azun, Vallée d'Ossau and Vallée d'Aspe) has a national park folder or booklet in French, *Randonnées dans le Parc National des Pyrénées*, describing 10 to 15 walks. Worthwhile for the route maps alone, they're on sale at local parks and tourist offices.

The park is covered by IGN's 1:25,000 Top 25 maps 154TOT *Ossau*, 164TOT *Vignemale*, 1748OT *Gavarnie* and 1748ET *Néouvielle*.

White-Water Sports

Rivers racing from the Pyrenean heights offer some of France's finest white water, since spring snow melt is supplemented by modest (sometimes not-so-modest) year-round rain, bringing a fairly steady annual flow. Organisations offering rafting and canoeing within or downstream from the national park include **A Boste Sport Loisir** (☎05 59 38 57 58; www.aboste.com; rue Léon Bérard, 64390 Sauveterre de Béarn) and **Centre Nautique de Soeix** (☎05 59 39 61 00; <http://soeix.free.fr>; quartier Soeix, 64400 Oloron-Ste-Marie).

i Information

Park visitor centres can be found at Etsaut, Laruns, Arrens-Marsous, Cauterets, Luz-St-Sauveur, Gavarnie and St-Lary-Soulan. **PNR Pyrénées** (www.parc-pyrenees.com), the park's official tourist site, is packed with useful info.

Vallée d'Aspe

The Vallée d'Aspe has been a transfrontier passage ever since Julius Caesar's Roman legionnaires marched through. South of Pau, the Gave d'Aspe (River Aspe) flows for some 50km from the Col du Somport, which marks the frontier with Spain, down to Oloron-Ste-Marie. Fewer than 3000 people live in the valley's 13 villages.

Its upper reaches are still among the most remote corners of the French Pyrénées and one of the final refuges of their more timid wildlife. But for many people the valley's seclusion is already a thing of the past, especially since the opening of the Tunnel de Somport, an 8km-long road tun-

nel across the Spanish border, which opened in 2003 despite howls of protest from local residents.



Sights & Activities



Ecomusée de la Vallée d'Aspe

RURAL MUSEUMS

(<http://ecomusee.vallee-aspe.com>) Life in the Vallée d'Aspe still ticks along at a traditional tilt, and there are four sites around the valley that explore the area's heritage and agricultural traditions, and its connections with the Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage route; they're collectively known as the Écomusée de la Vallée d'Aspe.

There are small folk museums in the villages of Sarrance, Lourdios-Ichère and Borcé, but the most interesting site by far is **Les Fermiers Basco-Béarnais** (Accous; ☎9.30am-1pm & 2.30-7.30pm), a farmers co-operative and thriving *fromagerie* (cheese shop), where you can sample cheese made from the milk of local ewes, goats and cows, and stock up with cheesy goodies to take home.

Opening hours at the sites vary widely depending on the time of year; see the website for details.

Outdoor Sports

There are lots of different ways to get out and active in and around the Vallée d'Aspe, with activities from guided walks to white-water rafting and paragliding. The tourist office in Bedous has full lists of accredited operators, along with details of forthcoming guided walks and nature trips around the valley.

One of the best ways to explore the area is from the saddle – **Auberge Cavalière** (☎05 59 34 72 30; www.auberge-cavaliere.com) in Accous runs multiday horseback trips costing €595/1030 for four/seven days, while **La Garbure** (☎05 59 34 88 98; www.garbure.net, in French) in Etsaut organises guided hikes and donkey-trekking, with accommodation in local *gîtes* and meals included. Prices start from €110/81 per adult/child for a three-day expedition, or you can even hire your own donkey for the day from €42.



Festivals & Events

The valley holds three annual markets in celebration of its local produce, including an Easter market in Bedous, a summer market in Aydius on the first Sunday of August, and an autumn food fair in Sarrance.

Other events to look out for are **Le Transhumance de Lourdios** in early June, when the local sheep herds are moved to their summer pastures in early June, and the **Fête du Fromage d'Etsaut**, a cheese fair on the last Sunday in July.

Sleeping & Eating

Accommodation in the valley is almost entirely geared towards walkers, so hotels and B&Bs are few and far between. There are plenty of campsites and *gîtes d'étapes* dotted around the villages, though – we've listed a few of our favourites below. Most places operate on a *demi-pension* basis.

Auberge Cavalière B&B, RESTAURANT €€
(☎05 59 34 72 30; www.auberge-cavaliere.com; near Accous; s/d half board €60/101; 🍴🍷) Despite its rustic exterior, this rambling old farm conceals five cute rooms with wood floors, fresh colours and wi-fi, and the owners also run a great country restaurant and offer horse-riding trips round the valley, as well as a self-contained *gîte* overlooking the Cirque de Lescun. The main auberge is about 3km south of Accous and just off the main road.

Au Château d'Arance

B&B €€

(☎05 59 34 75 50; www.hotel-auchateaudarance.com; near Cette-Eygun; r €59-69) From the hamlet of Cette-Eygun, 12km from Lescun, climb eastwards up a narrow, winding lane for 2.25km to reach this impressive 13th-century castle. There are eight rooms, rather old-fashioned, but all with superlative mountain views. The restaurant (*menus* €12 and €31) specialises in *cuisine du terroir* (country cooking).

La Toison d'Or

B&B €€

(☎06 08 70 75 18; www.aubergetoisondor.com; place de l'Église de Cette, Cette-Eygun; s/d/tr/q €40/50/65/75) Also in Cette-Eygun, this homely auberge is another peaceful retreat, offering a couple of doubles and four family rooms, all furnished in (very) rustic style. Luxury it ain't, but the divine hillside position and pleasant restaurant (complete with mountain-view patio, *bien sûr*) merit a special mention.

Le Pic d'Anie

B&B €

(☎05 59 34 71 54; www.hebergement-picdanie.com; Lescun; d/tr €43/58; ☺Apr-Sep) For Pyrenean atmosphere, this has to be one of the best *chambres d'hôte* in the Pyrenees. In the heart of the mountain village of Lescun,

THE PYRENEAN BROWN BEAR MILES RODDIS

In 2004 in the Vallée d'Aspe, a boar hunter shot the one animal that might (with a great deal of luck) have ensured the genetic survival of the Pyrenean bear. The last surviving native female, known as Cannelle to conservationists, was shot by the hunter, who claimed he was acting in self-defence when the bear charged him. France was in uproar; even then-President Chirac weighed in, declaring it 'a great loss for French and European biodiversity'.

So the Pyrenean brown bear is emphatically dead. But over the past decade-and-a-half, bears have been imported from Slovenia and released, and have now bred successfully. Today, between 15 and 20 brown bears roam the Pyrenees. Tragically, several have been killed in recent years, including one that fell from a cliff and another that was hit by a car on the road between Argèles-Gazost and Lourdes.

The reintroduction of bears is not universally welcomed, though, particularly in the western Pyrenees, where free-roaming sheep are bred for meat (as opposed to fenced sheep producing cheese in the east). It's thought that two to three hundred sheep are killed every year by bears; effective protection requires nightly vigils or the construction of kilometres of fencing to protect flocks.

As bear numbers increase, so too does the controversy. You'll see slogans daubed on rocks, such as '*Non aux ours*' (No to the bears) or '*Pas d'ours*' (No bears); these proliferate throughout the valleys. But the bears still have fans, as evidenced by occasional signs of support such as '*Bonne année et longue vie aux ours!*' (Happy New Year and long life to the bears!).

The government has recently announced that plans to reintroduce more bears to boost the population have been shelved, heralding tough times ahead for this shaggy symbol of French conservation.

LESCUN

It's worth risking vertigo along the steeply hairpinned, 5.5km detour south of Bedous to the mountain village of Lescun (900m) for jaw-dropping westerly views of the Cirque de Lescun, an amphitheatre of jagged limestone mountains, backed by the 2504m Pic d'Anie.

The village also marks the start of several fantastic day **hikes**. One of the best traces the GR10 northwest via the Refuge de Labérout and along the base of **Les Orgues de Camplong** (Camplong Organ Pipes). As long as the weather holds, you'll be guaranteed spectacular views back over the Vallée de Lescun and the distinctive Pic du Midi d'Ossau (2884m), but it's a high-altitude hike, so check the weather forecast, wear proper footwear, and pack wet-weather gear just in case.

Another popular route follows the GR10 south from Borce or Etsaut to **Fort du Portalet**, a 19th-century fortress used as a prison in WWII by the Germans and the Vichy government. In summer, two- to three-hour tours (€3) in English can be organised through the Bedous tourist office.

the stout little shuttered house conceals spartan rooms, a beamed dining room and tables covered with red-and-white checked tablecloths. The Carrafancq family also own a couple of self-contained *gîtes* round the village.

La Garbure GÎTE €
(☎05 59 34 88 98; www.garbure.net, in French; per person €12, half board €28) Lovely *gîte d'étape* in Etsaut; also organises donkey treks.

Le Mandragot GÎTE €
(☎05 59 34 59 33; place Sarraillé, Bedous; dm €12) Popular staging post for walkers on the Chemin de St Jacques.

Maison de la Montagne GÎTE €
(☎05 59 34 79 14; http://montagne.randonnee.chez-alice.fr; per person €15, half board €32) *Gîte* accommodation in a converted Lescun barn. The owner runs guided walks.

Camping Municipal de Carole CAMPGROUND €
(☎05 59 34 59 19; sites €8-12; ☼Mar-mid-Nov) Small and quiet site, off the N134 near Bedous.

Camping Despourrins CAMPGROUND €
(☎05 59 34 71 16; sites €6-8; ☼Mar-Oct) This tiny campsite is just off the N134, tucked behind the Fermiers Basco-Béarnais cheese centre.

i Information

Tourist Information

Bedous Tourist Office (☎05 59 34 57 57; www.tourismeaspe.com, in French & Spanish; place Sarraillé, Bedous; ☎9am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Mon-Sat) The valley's main tourist office.

Maison du Parc National des Pyrénées

(Park Information Centre; ☎05 59 34 88 30; ☎10.30am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm May-Oct) The main point of information for the park, housed in Etsaut's old train station

Maps

The 1:50,000-scale *Béarn: Pyrénées Carte No 3*, published by Rando Éditions, is a practical general trekking map of the area. A more detailed option is IGN's 1:25,000-scale Top 25 map 15470T, Ossau.

The national park's *Randonnées dans le Parc National des Pyrénées: Aspe* is a pack of information sheets on 11 walks, varying from 1½ hours to eight hours, in and around the valley.

The locally produced *45 Randonnées en Béarn: la Vallée d'Aspe* (€9) offers a great selection of walks in and around the valley.

i Getting There & Away

SNCF buses and trains connect Pau and Oloron-St-Marie up to 10 times daily. From Oloron there are three to four onward bus connections into the valley via Bedous to Etsaut, the majority continuing to Somport and the Spanish railroad of Canfranc.

Vallée d'Ossau

More scenic splendour awaits in the neighbouring Ossau Valley, which tracks the course of its namesake river for a 60km journey from the watershed at Col du Pourtalet (1794m) to its confluence with the Aspe at Oloron-St-Marie. The entrance to the valley as far as Laruns is broad, green and pastoral, but as you travel south the mountains start to stack up in dramatic

fashion, before broadening out again near the hamlet of Gabas.

The valley's main village is Laruns (37km from Pau), which has an excellent tourist office and national park centre, both well stocked with information on outdoor activities, including mountain climbing, canyoning, kayaking and horse riding. There are only a couple of hotels and restaurants: the vast majority of visitors tend to stay in one of the many campsites or walking *gîtes*, so the valley is probably best visited as a day trip unless you're packing a tent.

Sights & Activities

Falaise aux Vautours

WILDLIFE RESERVE

(Cliff of the Vultures; www.falaise-aux-vautours.com; adult/child €7/5; ☉10.30am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm, closed Jan & Mar) The griffon vulture (*Gyps fulvus*) was once a familiar sight over the Pyrenees, but habitat loss, hunting and modern farming methods have all taken their toll on these majestic birds. Now protected by law, over 120 nesting pairs roost around the limestone cliffs of this 82-hectare reserve. Live CCTV images are beamed from their nests to the visitors centre in Aste-Béon. There's also a good display on the vultures' life cycle, with captions in English.

Le Petit Train d'Artouste

MOUNTAIN RAILWAY

Six kilometres east of Gabas, the lakeside ski resort of Artouste-Fabriges (1250m) is hardly the most attractive in the Pyrenees,

but it's worth a visit for a quick trip up in the **cable car**, which soars up the 2032m Pic de la Sargette, and the chance to clamber aboard the open-topped **Petit Train d'Artouste** (📞reservations 05 59 05 36 99; www.train-artouste.com, in French; adult/child €21.50/17; ☉half-hourly 8.30am-5pm), a miniature mountain originally built for dam workers in the 1920s.

The train trundles along for 10km from the upper cable-car station to Lac d'Artouste, offering truly heart-stopping views over the valley and the spiky Pic du Midi d'Ossau – don't even think about if you're even vaguely nervous about heights. Unsurprisingly, the train gets busy, carrying over 100,000 passengers in its four months of operation between late May and September. Allow four hours for a visit.

If you're an experienced mountain-biker, you could choose to make the hair-raising BDD (*bicycles de descente*) downhill descent back down the mountain from the **Artouste Bike Park**. Bikes can be hired for €12/15 for a half/full day: call or ask at the Artouste cable-car stations.



Festivals & Events

The Vallée d'Ossau is known for its tangy cheese, *fromage d'Ossau*, made here in the high mountains from ewe's milk. You'll see lots of places round the valley selling it in summer, and the valley holds an annual **Foire au Fromage** (cheese fair) in October.

PYRENEAN PASSES

If you're travelling by road, it's worth remembering that the high-altitude passes around the Vallée d'Ossau, the Vallée d'Aspe and the Vallée de Gaves are often closed due to snow. Many of these mountain passes are infamous among cycling fans as some of the most punishing stages of the Tour de France. Signs are posted along the main roads indicating whether or not they're *ouvert* (open) or *fermé* (closed).

The key ones to look out for are the **Col d'Aubisque** (1709m) west towards Argelès-Gazost, which is generally only open from May to October. An alternative that's open year-round is the D35 between Louvie-Juzon and Nay.

The narrow D294 between Escot and Bielle corkscrews for 21km over the **Col de Marie-Blanque** (1035m), providing a useful road link between the Aspe and Ossau valleys. It's generally open from late spring to autumn.

The **Col du Pourtalet** (1795m) into Spain is usually open for most of the year, as it's an important border crossing, but it also closes regularly during periods of heavy snowfall.

The **Col du Tourmalet** (2115m) between Barèges and La Mongie is the highest road pass in the Pyrenees. It's only open for a few months of the year, which can be a serious pain if you're thinking about travelling east to the Pic du Midi (for example from Cauterets). When it's closed, you'll have to take an extremely long detour north via Lourdes and Bagnères-de-Bigorre.

Information

La Maison de la Vallée d'Ossau Office de Tourisme (☎05 59 05 31 41; www.valleedossau-tourisme.com; ☀9am-noon & 2-6pm) On Laruns' main square.

National Park Visitor Centre (☎05 59 05 41 59; ☀9am-noon & 2-5.30pm) Beside the tourist office in Laruns.

Getting There & Around

Citram Pyrénées (☎05 59 27 22 22) runs buses from Pau to Laruns (one hour, four daily).

SNCF trains from Pau stop at Buzy-en-Béarn from where there are a few onward bus connections as far as Laruns (40 minutes).

Cauterets

POP 1300 / ELEVATION 930M

It might not have the altitude or attitude of its sister ski stations in the Alps, but in many respects Cauterets is a much more pleasant place to hit the slopes. While many of the Alpine resorts have been ruthlessly modernised and crammed to capacity during the winter and summer seasons, Cauterets has clung on to much of its *fin-de-siècle* character, with a stately spa and plenty of grand 19th-century residences dotted round town.

Hemmed in by snowy peaks on every side, Cauterets is a superb summertime base for exploring the forests, meadows,

lakes and streams of the Parc National des Pyrénées, and in winter it's doused with snow for at least six months of the year. It's nearly always the first of France's Pyrenean ski stations to open and the last to close.

Sights & Activities

Thermal Spas

HOT BATHS

It wasn't actually the slopes which attracted the first tourists to Cauterets – it was the area's hot springs, which bubble up from deep underground at temperatures between 36°C and 53°C. As always, the waters are rumoured to have numerous healing properties, but miracle cure or not, they're ideal after a long day's hiking.

The **Thermes César** (www.thermesdecacauterets.com; rue Docteur Domer; ☀Feb-Nov) offers lots of different spa packages starting at around €10 for a soak in a hot tub, up to several hundred euros for a multiday spa package.

Pavillon des Abeilles

BEEHIVES

(23bis av du Mamelon Vert; admission free; ☀3-7pm Wed-Sat) This educational attraction is all about bees, with a glass-sided hive, video and honey of every possible flavour. Longer hours in school holidays.

Pont d'Espagne

WALKING TRAILS

Cauterets is a fantastic summer walking base. Numerous high-altitude trails leave from the viewpoint and giant Puntas car

SKIING IN THE FRENCH PYRENEES

Let's be frank: the best Pyrenees skiing lies across the watershed, in Spain's Baqueira-Beret and Andorra's Gran Valira. But the more modest resorts on the French side offer reasonable downhill skiing and snowboarding for beginners and intermediates.

The Pyrenees receive less snow than the much higher Alps and the falls are generally moister and heavier. In addition to downhill skiing, the potential for cross-country skiing, ski touring and, increasingly, snowshoeing is also good.

The French side has over 20 downhill ski stations, and more than 10 cross-country areas.

Ax Trois Domaines Above Ax-les-Thermes are 75km of gentle runs, tracing their way through pine forest and, higher up, the open spaces of Campels.

Barèges-La Mongie This combined resort, on either side of Col du Tourmalet and at the foot of the Pic du Midi de Bigorre, has 69 runs, making it the French Pyrenees' most extensive skiing area.

Cauterets Snow lingers late at this long-established spa town-ski resort; you can still whiz downhill here when other resorts have closed down for the season.

Superbagnères A cabin lift hurtles up from the spa town of Bagnères de Luchon for skiing above the treeline at 1800m.

Val d'Azun The best cross-country skiing in the Pyrenees, about 30km southwest of Lourdes, where you can plough along 110km of trails between 1350m and 1600m.

park at Pont d'Espagne, reached via a four-mile switchbacking D920 from Cauterets (the road is locally known as the *Chemin des Cascades* thanks to the series of waterfalls which thunder down the valley right beside the road). There's an enormous car park at the top of the road that gets crammed in summer: the first 15 minutes is free, otherwise it's €5 for up to four hours.

Heading south from Pont d'Espagne, there's a choice of two valleys, each slightly different in character. Following the Gave de Gaube upstream through a pine wood brings you to the much-photographed **Lac de Gaube** and, nearby, *Hôtellerie de Gaube*, where you can sip a drink or recharge with a snack or midday *menus* (around €15) on the terrace, overlooking a waterfall. Three hours, not counting breaks, is generous for this out-and-back walk. Alternatively, you can cheat by catching the combination **télécabine and télésiège** (adult/child €8/5) up to the top from the Pont d'Espagne visitor centre, which cuts down walking time to a supremely slack 20 minutes.

A longer trek up the gentler, more open **Vallée de Marcadau** leads to the high-altitude **Refuge Wallon-Marcadau** (☎05 62 92 64 28; ☉Feb–mid-Apr & Jun–Sep) at 1866m. Allow about five hours for the round-trip.

In winter, the Pont d'Espagne is a popular starting point for snowshoe walks and *ski au fond* (cross-country skiing). Ask at the tourist office about local guides.

Shuttle buses (single/return €4/7) between Cauterets bus station and Pont d'Espagne run during the ski season (twice daily) and in summer (six times daily). If you're parking at the Puntas car park, it costs €3 for an hour, €5 for one to six hours, or €7 for more than 12 hours.

Skiing & Mountain Biking

The fast new **Télécabine du Lys** operates mid-June to mid-September and from December to the end of April. It rises over 900m to the Cirque du Lys, where in summer you can catch the Grand Barbat chairlift up to Crêtes du Lys (2400m). A return trip costs €8/6 per adult/child to Cirque du Lys or €10/7.50 including the chairlift.

During winter, the Cirque du Lys offers around 36km of ski-runs, ranging from 2415m to 1850m, and best suited to beginner and intermediate skiers. Lift passes cost €29.50 per day or €150 for six days. In summer it becomes a great area for

mountain-biking, with a 1500m drop in altitude and plenty of downhill trails.

Ski gear and bike hire are available from several places round town.

Sleeping

Cauterets has plenty of big hotels, but the vast majority of people choose to stay in *gîtes* or self-catering apartments during the ski season.

TOP CHOICE Hôtel du Lion d'Or HOTEL €€
(☎05 62 92 52 87; www.liondor.eu; 12 rue Richelieu; d €82-174; ☉) This sweet Alpine-style hotel, under the Logis umbrella, oozes mountain character. The exterior's covered in shutters and window boxes, and inside are lots of charming, old-time rooms decked out in candy-stripe pinks, sunny yellows and duck-egg blues. Knick-knacks and curios are dotted throughout the building – an old gramophone here, a stuffed stag's head there – and the restaurant serves up classic Pyrenean cuisine in cosy surroundings. The owner's a ski instructor, so he's full of tips on things to see and do. Rates tend to fluctuate wildly depending on the season.

Hôtel-Restaurant Astérides-Sacca

HOTEL €€
(☎05 62 92 50 02; www.asterides-sacca.com; 11 bd Latapie-Flurin; r €41-75; ☉closed early-Oct–early-Dec) On one of the Pyrenees' prettiest streets, lined with 19th-century buildings and often used as a film set, is this venerable, family-run establishment. The checked-fabric rooms have a more contemporary feel than the pastel, floral ones, but all are spacious and appealing. Half- and full-board options let you take full advantage of its splendid restaurant.

Hôtel Christian

HOTEL €€
(☎05 62 92 50 04; www.hotel-christian.fr, in French; 10 rue Richelieu; s/d €66/80; ☉Dec–Sep; ☉) This salmon-pink hotel was originally a posh 19th-century *residence*, and its '80s-style decor could certainly do with a bit of an overhaul. Still, it's clean and very comfortable, and there's a charming rear garden.

Camping Le Pégûere

CAMPGROUND €€
(☎05 62 92 52 91; www.les-campings.com/peguere; per site €11-13, cabins per week €300-420; ☉May–Sep) Wonderful mountain-view campsite 1.5km north of town on the D920. Aim for one of the riverside pitches, or plump for a chalet if you're after a bit more comfort.



Eating & Drinking



Le Sacca

TRADITIONAL FRENCH €€

(☎05 62 92 50 02; www.asterides-sacca.com; 11 bd Latapie-Flurin; menus €17.50-43; ☺closed 10 Oct-20 Dec) Far and away the best table in town, the restaurant at the Asterides-Sacca is a winning blend of classical French fare and artistic presentation. Mountain produce features heavily – you'll often see trout, boar and wild game on the menu – and although it's quite formal inside (starchy napkins, waistcoated waiter), it's actually a very relaxed affair.

En So de Bedau

REGIONAL CUISINE €€

(☎05 62 92 60 21; 11 rue de la Raillère; mains €13-19, menu €20; ☺hours vary) A bit rough round the edges, but for hearty Pyrenean *cuisine paysanne* you won't find a better place in town. There's little in the way of decorative frills – rough stone walls, simple wicker chairs, scuffed tables – but the rich, traditional dishes are packed with flavour. Look out for pork dishes made from local black Bigorre pigs.

La Sierra

REGIONAL CUISINE €

(☎05 62 42 68 97; 8 rue Verdun; menus €14-17; ☺Thu-Tue) Another honest and unpretentious option, good for local flavours such as grilled trout, duck and *garbure*, a thick country soup made with seasonal meat and veg.

La Ferme Basque

BAR €

(rte de Cambasque; ☺hours vary) With a plunging view of Cauterets from its terrace, this place 4km west of town by road makes a great spot for a daylight drink.

Self-Catering

Cheese, meats and delicious local sausages are just some of the things you'll find behind the stalls of Cauterets' **covered market** (av Leclerc). Other shops worthy of a mention:

A La Reine Margot

SWEET SHOP €

(pl Clemenceau) One of many shops round town selling the sweet fruit-flavoured pastilles known as 'berlingots', a speciality of Cauterets. Drop by in the afternoon and you can often see the sweets being made.

Fromagerie du Saloir

GOURMET FOOD €

(av Leclerc) Lots of cheeses, plus meats, hampers and liqueurs (look out for the one called Gratte Cul, or 'scratch arse').

Gailhou Durdos

GOURMET FOOD €

(rue de Belfort) Local wines and other specialities.



Information

Maison du Parc National des Pyrénées (☎05 62 92 52 56; place de la Gare; ☺9.30am-noon & 3-7pm) Sells walking maps and guidebooks, and organises guided walks in summer.

Tourist office (☎05 62 92 50 50; www.cauterets.com; place Maréchal Foch; ☺9am-12.30pm & 2-7pm) The tourist office publishes *Sentiers du Lavedon* (in French; €5), outlining seven easy walks in the area.



Getting There & Away

The last train steamed out of Cauterets' magnificent station in 1947. It now serves as the **bus station** (☎05 62 92 53 70; place de la Gare), with SNCF buses running between Cauterets and Lourdes train station (€7, one hour, at least five daily).

Vallée des Gaves & Around

Gentle and pastoral, the Vallée des Gaves (Valley of the Mountain Streams) extends south from Lourdes to Pierrefitte-Nestalas. Here the valley forks: the narrow, rugged eastern tine twists via Gavarnie while the western prong corkscrews up to Cauterets.



Pic du Midi

VIEWPOINT

(www.picdumidi.com; adult/child €25/15; ☺daily Feb & Jun-late Sep) The main reason for venturing along the valley is the chance to make the unforgettable ascent up to the Pic du Midi de Bigorre (2877m), one of the highest points in the Pyrenees. Once the preserve of mountaineers and astronomers, the Pic du Midi now affords one of the most eye-popping panoramas in the entire Pyrenees. Several terraces provide 360-degree views all round the mountain, but needless to say it's absolutely essential you save it for a nice day – early morning and late evening are by far the best times in terms of views.

A cable car climbs right to the top of the mountain in around 15 minutes from the ski resort of La Mongie (1800m). Check the website for opening hours outside of those given here. If you're travelling east from the other valleys via the Col du Tourmalet, make doubly sure it's open – see the boxed text, p673.

Le Donjon des Aigles

BIRD PARK

(☎05 62 97 19 59; www.donjon-des-aigles.com; Beaucens; adult/child €12/7; ☺10am-noon & 2.30-6.30pm) About 15 minutes' drive south of Lourdes in the spectacular surroundings of the 12th-century Château de Beaucens, you can see one of the world's largest col-

CIRQUE DE GAVARNIE

Along with the Pic du Midi, the other absolutely unmissable sight in the Pyrenees is the **Cirque de Gavarnie**, a breathtaking mountain amphitheatre ringed by icy peaks, several of which top out at over 3000m. With a valley-to-peak height over five times that of the Eiffel Tower, the amphitheatre is impressive enough in its own right, but it's also famous for its huge **waterfalls**, best seen after periods of heavy rain. In winter, the frozen falls also provide some of the most renowned ice-climbs in the world, frequently used by top mountaineers training for ascents in the Himalayas and other major mountain ascents.

Gavarnie is 52km south of Lourdes at the end of the D921. There are a couple of large car parks in the village, from where it's about a two-hour walk to the base of the amphitheatre. Wear proper shoes, as snow lingers along the trail into early summer. Between Easter and October you can clip-clop along on a horse or donkey (around €25 for a round-trip).

If you still haven't had your scenic thrills, you might feel brave enough to take the detour to another spectacular mountain viewpoint at the little-visited **Cirque de Troumouse**. It's reached via a hair-raising toll road (€4 per vehicle), which snakes its way precariously up the mountainside to the amphitheatre; there are no road barriers, and the drops are truly stomach-churning, so take things very slowly indeed.

It's about 8km to the top. Snows permitting, the road is open between April and October. Look out for the signposts near Gèdre, 6.5km north of Gavarnie.

lections of birds of prey. Among the taloned residents on display are bald eagles, fish eagles, horned owls, vultures and a collection of colourful parrots: you can visit the park throughout the day, but don't miss the daily flying displays at 3.30pm and 5pm (3pm, 4.30pm and 6pm in July and August).

Upper Garonne Valley

ST-BERTRAND DE COMMINGES

On an isolated hillock, St-Bertrand and its **Cathédrale Ste-Marie** (adult/child incl audio-guide in English €4/1.50; ☉9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 2-7pm Sun) loom over the Vallée de Garonne and the much-pillaged remains of the Gallo-Roman town of **Lugdunum Convenarum**, where you can wander at will for free.

The splendid Renaissance oak choir stalls, carved in 1535 by local artisans, sit below the soaring Gothic east end of the cathedral.

BAGNÈRES DE LUCHON

POP 3032 / ELEVATION 630M

Bagnères de Luchon (or simply Luchon) is a trim little town of gracious 19th-century buildings, expanded to accommodate the *curistes* who came to take the waters at its splendid spa. It's now better known as one of the Pyrenees' most popular ski areas, with the challenging runs of Superbagnères right on its doorstep.

👁 Sights & Activities

For the full range of outdoor possibilities, ask the tourist office for a copy of its free *La Montagne Active* brochure.

Thermes

HOT BATHS

(Health Spa; ☎05 61 79 22 97; www.thermes-luchon.fr; ☉Mar-mid-Nov) Luchon's thermal baths are at the southern end of allée d'Étigny. It's €12 to loll in the scented steam of the 160m-long underground *vaporarium*, then dunk yourself in the caressing 32°C waters of its pool, but there's a huge variety of other packages (from mudpacks to hot stones and nasal douches) if you fancy spoiling yourself for a little longer.

Télécabine

SKI LIFT

(adult/child €7.90/5.90; ☉9am-12.15pm & 2-6pm Jul-Aug, 1.30-6pm weekends May-Jun & Sep, open every day in winter depending on snow conditions) Luchon's ski lift whisks walkers in summer and skiers in winter to Superbagnères (1860m), the starting point for countless walks, ski runs and mountain-bike trails.

Walking

An amazing 250km of marked trails, ranging from gentle valley-bottom strolls to more demanding high-mountain treks, thread their way from Luchon and Superbagnères. The tourist office carries a useful free pamphlet, *Sentiers Balisés du Pays de*

Luchon, and also sells the detailed *Randonnées autour de Luchon* (€10.95).

Sleeping

Le Castel de la Pique

HOTEL €€

(☎05 61 88 43 66; www.castel-pique.fr; 31 cours des Quinconces; s €50-60, d €60-70; ☎) This hotel – formerly one of Luchon's grandest private residences – is chock-full of period charm. The rooms are hardly luxurious, but what they lack in mod-cons they more than compensate for in odd-bod interest. Sanded wood floors, original mantelpieces and tall French windows overlooking the hotel grounds, plus the warmest of family welcomes, make it a really special spot.

Hôtel d'Etigny

HOTEL €€€

(☎05 61 79 01 42; www.hotel-etigny.com; d €49-138; ☎) Opposite the thermal baths, this swanky establishment makes the perfect place for some postsoak pampering. The public areas are suitably plush – plenty of upholstered armchairs and chandeliers – but the rooms are quite different, veering from heavy-drape heritage to uncluttered modern. In general, it's worth paying for the more expensive ones. Outside there's a sweet garden where you can breakfast in summer.

Hôtel Panoramic

HOTEL €€

(☎05 61 79 30 90; www.hotelpanoramic.fr; 6 av Carnot; s €44-75, d €53-75; ☎) Another spick-and-span option near the centre of town, with corporate-style rooms in standard shades of peach, scarlet and orange. It's not terribly exciting, but the breakfast spread is great and the hotel also offers paragliding packages.

Eating

Café de la Paix

BRASSERIE €€

(☎05 61 94 74 70; 19 allée d'Etigny; mains €12-18) Luchon's lively streetside brasserie turns out top-quality fare quick as a flash, especially meat and fish *grillée à la plancha* (grilled Spanish-style on a metal plate).

L'Héptaméron des Gourmets

GASTRONOMIC €€€

(☎05 61 79 78 55; 2 blvd Charles de Gaulle; menus €25-55; ☎lunch Sun, dinner Tue-Sun) For a gourmet feed in Luchon, this ubertraditional restaurant gets the local nod, serving up royally rich plates of *filet de jeune cerf* (stag fillet) and *brandade de truite* (trout). It's extremely fussy food, but if you like the formal style, you'll be in for a treat.

L'Arbesquens

REGIONAL CUISINE €€

(☎05 61 79 33 69; 47 allée d'Etigny; menus €11-25; ☎closed Wed & dinner Sun) Fondue's definitely the order of the day at this timber-beamed restaurant – there are over 18 varieties on offer, but you'll need at least two people to get through it, and you might feel the need to work off a few calories the next day...

Self-Catering

Luchon's **covered market** (rue Docteur Gernès; ☎daily Apr-Oct, Wed & Sat Nov-Mar) was established in 1897 and is still going strong.

Information

Luchon tourist office (☎05 61 79 21 21; www.luchon.com; 18 allée d'Etigny; ☎9am-7pm) Shorter hours outside peak season.

Getting There & Around

SNCF trains and coaches run between Luchon and Montréjeau (€6.60, 50 minutes, seven daily), which has frequent connections to Toulouse (€15.60) and Pau (€17.30).

Vallée de l'Ariège

Deep under the limestone mountains of the sleepy Vallée de l'Ariège, underground rivers have carved out some of Europe's most amazing (and otherworldly) subterranean caverns, many of which many of which are covered with cave paintings left behind by prehistoric people.

Sights & Activities

Lombrives

UNDERGROUND CAVES

(www.grotte-lombrives.fr; standard tour adult/child €7.50/4.50; ☎May-Sep & school holidays) Europe's largest cave system, with a maze of over 200 stalactite-lined tunnels, grottoes and rock galleries to explore: look out for the sandy expanse known as the Sahara Desert, and several limestone columns variously supposed to resemble a mammoth, a wizard and the Virgin Mary. If you're feeling adventurous, a longer five-hour 'journey to the centre of the earth' (€34.70/25 per adult/child) can be arranged by prior reservation. The cave is 22km north of Ax-les-Thermes on the N20 near the village of Ussat-les-Bains.

Rivière Souterraine de Labouiche

UNDERGROUND RIVER

(☎05 61 65 04 11; adult/child €8.50/6.50; ☎9.30am-5.15pm) Beneath Labouiche, 6km northwest of Foix, flows Europe's longest

navigable underground river. It's possible to take an amazing 1500m, 75-minute boat trip along part of its length, taking in some of the huge underground caverns and eerie chambers carved out over the course of millions of years.

Château des Comtes de Foix CASTLE
(www.sesta.fr/chateau-de-foix.html; adult/child €4.50/3.30; ☎9.45am-6.30pm) The triple-towered Château des Comtes de Foix stands guard above the town of Foix. Constructed in the 10th century as a stronghold for the counts of Foix, it served as a prison from the 16th century onwards; look for the graffiti scratched into the stones by some hapless inmate. Today it houses a small archaeological museum. There's usually at least one daily tour of the castle in English. Hours are shorter outside of summer.

Les Forges de Pyrène MUSEUM
(www.sesta.fr/forges-de-pyrene.html; adult/child €8/6; ☎10am-7pm) In Montgaillard, 4.5km south of Foix, is a living museum of Ariège folk tradition with its own blacksmith, a baker, a cobbler and a basket weaver. Spread over 5 hectares, it illustrates a host of lost or dying trades such as glass-blowing, tanning, thatching and nail-making.

Grotte du Mas d'Azil CAVE, MUSEUM
(www.sesta.fr/grotte-du-mas-d-azil.html; adult/child €6.30/4; ☎caves 10am-6pm, museum 11am-1pm & 2-7pm) This massive natural rock shelter contains several galleries containing rare prehistoric engravings of bison, horses, fish, deer, a cat and even – most hauntingly of all – a human face. The ticket also includes entry to a small prehistoric museum displaying artefacts discovered in the cave, including flint tools, arrowheads and carvings.

The caves are about 25 northwest of Foix, near the village of Le Mas d'Azil. Opening hours are shorter outside summer.

TOP CHOICE **Grotte de Niaux** CAVE ART
(☎05 61 05 88 37; www.sesta.fr/grotte-de-niaux.html; adult/child €9.40/7) The Ariège area has numerous caves used by ancient people. The best known is La Grotte de Niaux, considered to be of similar size and importance as the caves in Lascaux in the Dordogne and Altamira in Spain.

Around the caves' walls are delicate etchings of bison, horses and ibex, but visitor numbers are limited to preserve an even temperature of 12°C inside the cave. Guided tours have to be arranged in advance. There

CHÂTEAU DE BEAUREGARD

If you've always had a secret hankering to play lord of the manor, you won't want to miss this opulent **château complex** (☎05 61 66 66 64; www.chateaubeauregard.net; av de la Résistance, St-Girons; d €80-200; ☎☎) in the little village of **St-Girons**, halfway between St-Gaudens and Foix along the D117. Topped by turrets and surrounded by 2½ hectares of private gardens, it's a bit of an architectural wonder, and the rooms more than live up to the exterior promise: all different, all delightful, all full of quirky touches (such as bathrooms hidden away in the castle's corner towers). Throw in a garden pool, a soothing candlelit spa and an absolutely superb Gascon restaurant (menu €33), and you have one of the best castle hideaways in southwest France. Mum's the word, though...

are hourly tours in summer, dropping to around three a day in winter. From April to September there's usually at least one daily tour in English, but times change regularly, so check in advance with the ticket office.

The caves are near Tarascon-sur-Ariège, about 12km south of Foix.

Parc de la Préhistoire MUSEUM
(☎05 61 05 10 10; www.sesta.fr; Tarascon-sur-Ariège; adult/child €9.70/7.20; ☎10am-8pm) This museum-park administers five of the area's key sites, and also houses a fantastic museum exploring the area's ancient history. The centrepiece is the Grand Atelier, in a cutting-edge modern building combining film, projections, cave painting reconstructions, artefacts and exhibits in five separate zones, covering the various stages of the area's artistic and cultural development.

Sleeping & Eating

Sleeping and eating around Ariège isn't going to set your world on fire, but there are a few half-decent options in and around Foix, and several nice places in the heart-tugging pretty village of Mirepoix, about 25 km to the northeast.

TOP CHOICE **Hôtel les Remparts** HOTEL €€
(☎05 61 68 12 15; www.hotelremparts.com; 6 cours Pons Tarde, Mirepoix; s €60-80, d €70-90; ☎) If you're driving, you'll be

AUBERGE LES MYRTILLES

Tucked away high in the mountains about 10km to the west of Foix, the **Auberge les Myrtilles** (☎05 61 65 16 46; www.auberge-les-myrtilles.com; Col des Marrous; r €55-105, half board per person €53.50-65.50; 🍴🚶) is one of the Pyrenees' secret gems. It feels a bit like stepping into the pages of *Heidi*, with eight contemporary mountain chalet rooms offering truly amazing views across the Ariège countryside. But this is no rustic *auberge*, far from it in fact: there's a jacuzzi, a sauna, and a fantastic pool, all of which offer a different perspective on the surrounding peaks. And as if that's not enough, you can tuck into authentic Ariègeois home cooking in the excellent restaurant, with dishes such as *cèpes ravioli*, duck stew and the local speciality of *azinat* (sausage, duck and vegetable hotpot). On a sunny summer's day, sitting under trees in the alpine garden, you really won't ever want to leave.

extremely glad you made the detour to this sexy hotel-restaurant in well-to-do Mirepoix. It's an intimate place: just nine rooms, all with their own decorative tics (patches of exposed stone, bundles of twisted willow, stripped-wood floors), plus an absolutely delightful breakfast salon with its original beams and chimney. The restaurant (menus €26 to €48) has made a name for itself, too, thanks to its young chef Nicolas Coutand, and the setting in a brick-vaulted cellar is really one to remember.

Maison des Consuls

HOTEL €€€

(☎05 61 68 81 81; www.maisonsdesconsuls.com; 6 place du Maréchal Leclerc, Mirepoix; d €110-130; 🍴🚶) At this elegant hotel, all the rooms have been decorated to echo a historic figure from Mirepoix's history: the nicest are Dame Louise, with its four-poster and fab view over the square, and the Suite de l'Astronome, with a little private terrace overlooking the town's red-tiled rooftops.

Hôtel Restaurant Lons

HOTEL €€

(☎05 34 09 28 00; www.hotel-lons-foix.com; 6 place Dutilh, Foix; d from €53.50) Several of the colourful, good-value rooms at this former coaching inn overlook the river. The attached restaurant (lunch/dinner *menus* from €11.50/14) has similar river views through its picture windows, and offers good-value half board.

Hostellerie la Barbacane du Château

HOTEL €€

(☎05 61 65 50 44; <http://hotelbarbacane.fr>; 1 av de Lérida, Foix; d from €50; 🍴🚶) Ancient house matched by ancient rooms, all wrapped up in an imposing redbrick *maison bourgeoise* in Foix. It's comfy enough, but it does feel a tad antediluvian.

i Information

Foix tourist office (☎05 61 65 12 12; www.tourisme-foix-varilhes.fr; 29 rue Delcassé, Foix; ☎9am-6pm) Shorter hours outside summer.

i Getting There & Away

Regular trains connect Toulouse and Foix (€13, 1¼ hours, 10-plus daily).

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